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Fat Lady Phantom
Shameful Transformations
in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*

The aim of this article is to present shame as an affect which induces transformation of the shamed subject. Such a transformation, or correction, is to neutralise the feeling of shame. However, in the case of women, where both shame and transformation are primarily bodily, the apparent metamorphosis turns out to be elusive and ineffective. I read Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, and the character of the Fat Lady, as a suggestion of an alternative way out of the feminine, bodily shame.

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In their article "Gender Role Stress in Relation to Shame, Guilt and Externalisation," Paul Elfthim, Maureen Kenny and James Mahalik suggest that a situation in which one is most likely to experience shame is when s/he deviates from socially prescribed behaviours.[1] Among these "socially prescribed behaviours" are gender role standards. While masculine shame is claimed to be

[1] Paul W. Elfthim, Maureen E. Kenny, James R. Mahalik, "Gender Role Stress in Relation to Shame, Guilt, and Externalization," *Journal of Counseling & Development*, Vol. 79, No. 4 (2001), p. 433.

"linked to failures in instrumental achievements,"[2] feminine shame "revolve[s] around relational failures."[3] According to shame psychologists there are five situations which typically manifest violation of traditional female gender role norms; these are: failure in intimate relationships, physical unattractiveness, victimisation, unassertiveness and failure to "nurture" others.[4] The one, however, which is specifically shame-provoking is physical unattractiveness.[5] Relational failure to meet relational beauty myths is hence the basic component of feminine shame. In contemporary Western culture the myth of beauty is the myth of thinness: an attractive woman is a thin woman. Thinness has outdistanced well-proportioned bodies and fine-featured faces; obesity is unforgivable: "[n]obody [regards] being fat as a misfortune; it [is] viewed simply as a disgusting failure of will."[6] A fat body is a parody of a good body and the core of physical unattractiveness; it is a "huge, featureless blur,"[7] it is a good body that swelled and overflowed its borders. A fat body is a failure, shame on it.

According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, shame is first activated when "the circuit of mirroring expressions between the child's face and the caregiver's recognised face is [...] broken,"[8] or, in other words, when the recognised face, does not want to play its part and "fails to be recognisable, or recognising."[9] Such a failure "follows a moment of exposure [which] reveals aspects of the self of a particularly sensitive, intimate and vulnerable nature."[10] Feminine shame is evoked when what her exposed body communicates is misread,

[2] Ibidem.
[3] Ibidem.
[4] Ibidem.
[5] Ibidem, p. 437.
[6] Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (London: Virago Press, 1982), p. 90.
[7] Ibidem, p. 82.
[8] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 36.
[9] Ibidem.
[10] Donald L. Nathanson, "A Timetable for Shame," in *The Many Faces of Shame*, ed. Donald L. Nathanson (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1987), p. 4.

when the "serious" bodily text is deciphered as a pasquinade. Shame, however, is not only "before the other,"[11] but, importantly, it is "an experience of the self by the self [in which] the phenomenological distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost."[12] In order for shame to emerge, the other is not necessary:

> [t]he source of shame can be either in the self or in another, with the result that individuals can experience shame whether or not others are present and watching. Individuals will also feel shame whether or not others are actually doing the shaming. Only the self need watch the self and only the self need shame the self.[13]

No matter, hence, if feminine shame first emerges through the scornful gaze of the actual other, or as a result of a failure to meet the ego ideal, the contemptible image immediately becomes internalised and simultaneously interrupts identification and "makes identity."[14] In Gershen Kaufman's words: "[a]nswers to the questions, 'Who am I?' and 'Where do I belong?' are forged in the crucible of shame."[15] Shame "floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication,"[16] and even if it is a result of social disapproval, it inevitably leads to self-devaluation. In other words, the very fact that a woman feels feminine shame, means that she herself realised (if not passed), the negative judgement on her appearance and "[feels] seen in a painfully diminished sense."[17] Her innocence (i.e. unconsciousness of beauty ideals she fails to represent) is lost and shame surrounds her like fat astral body which "[floats] around by itself, attached to [her] by something like a long rubber band."[18]

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[11] W. Ray Crozier, "Self-consciousness in Shame: The Role of the Other," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1998), p. 274.

[12] Ibidem, p. 273.

[13] Gershen Kaufman, *The Psychology of Shame: Theory and Treatment of Shame-Based Syndromes* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1996), p. 6.

[14] Crozier, "Self-consciousness in Shame...," p. 273.

[15] Kaufman, *The Psychology of Shame...*, p. 5.

[16] Crozier, "Self-consciousness in Shame...," p. 273.

[17] Kaufman, *The Psychology of Shame...*, p. 17.

[18] Atwood, *Lady Oracle...*, p. 111.

Shame poses "an imminent danger if distressing awareness is not removed from consciousness,"[19] and when it is the awareness of imperfect body, the "removal" appears impossible – because no body is perfect. However, whether the effort is futile or not, shame – "sickness of the soul"[20] – prompts one to recovery: "[b]y alerting us to misconduct or wrongdoing – to transgression in whatever form – shame motivates necessary self-correction."[21] Thanks to shame, the fat body is to be "corrected," transformed, shaped anew.

A shamed body is an exposed (awkward, silenced, blushing) body: shame is visible. On the other hand, however, this bodily visibleness is experienced as apparent transparency: "it feels as if others can see inside us or actually read our thoughts."[22] With its recurrent, haunting, transparent nature shame bears a resemblance to a spectre, a phantom, which in Margaret Atwood's novel *Lady Oracle* takes the form of the Fat Lady that preys on Joan Foster, the heroine of the story.

Joan Foster was fat. As a child, she was plump and – which she particularly scorned as an adult – unaware of it. That is why she would shamelessly display her "obscene"[23] and "indecent"[24] fat body, unconscious of the fact that she looked like a "giant caterpillar,"[25] like a laughable freak. Joan was enrolled in a dancing school by her thin mother, and started to romanticise ballet dancers; she imagined herself pink, light, glittering and "leaping through the air [...] lifted by a thin man."[26]

This fantasy was to come true at the annual Spring Recital where the girl's group performed the number called The Butterfly Frolic. Contrary to Joan's expectations, however, frolicking turned out to be the pleasure of the thin. When Joan first tried on the costume

[19] Melvin R. Lansky, "Shame and the Scope of Psychoanalytic Understanding," *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 38, No. 8 (1995), p. 1077.

[20] Kaufman, *The Psychology of Shame*..., p. 5.

[21] Ibidem.

[22] Ibidem, p. 18.

[23] Atwood, *Lady Oracle*..., p. 46.

[24] Ibidem.

[25] Ibidem, p. 47.

[26] Ibidem, p. 43.

(short, pink, gauzy skirt, tight bodice) and saw herself in the mirror, she was "taken aback,"[27] for "[she] did not look like a butterfly."[28] The six-year-old girl did not quite know what it was that took her aback (she suspected it was the lack of cellophane wings she was not allowed to try on), but the adult Joan remembered the "jiggly thighs and the bulges of fat where breasts would later be and [her] plump upper arms and floppy waist."[29] Her yet unclear anxiety stirred, during the dress rehearsal Joan was alarmed at the sight of her thin mother talking to the choreographer. Indeed, in order to protect the girl from shame, the two women decided to change the scenario and to offer Joan a special role in the performance, because "[she was] the brightest girl in the class:"[30] the role of a Mothball. Quite unexpectedly, from the lofty butterfly she was hence transformed into something which was not only round and stinky, but which was destined to be, quite literally, kept in the closet. Joan's cloudy skirt was taken away and replaced with a teddy-bear costume (in order not to mislead the audience, they hanged a sign that said "Mothball" on her neck). Moreover, Joan was not allowed to actually take part in the dance she practised so hard; she was to roll onto the stage at the very end of the performance and scare the butterflies away: "[a]t the right moment Miss Flegg gave [her] a shove and [she] lurched onto the stage, trying to look [...] as much like a mothball as possible."[31] The dance went well. Crying behind the fur from the "humiliation disguised as a privilege,"[32] Joan danced "the dance of rage and destruction,"[33] vigorously improvising and shaking "the flimsy stage"[34] to the applause of the audience. In the bulky teddy-bear suit Joan felt "it was not [her],"[35] but at the same

[27] Ibidem, p. 46.
[28] Ibidem.
[29] Ibidem.
[30] Ibidem, p. 48.
[31] Ibidem, p. 50.
[32] Ibidem.
[33] Ibidem.
[34] Ibidem.
[35] Ibidem.

time, sweaty and concealed, she felt "naked and exposed, as if this ridiculous dance was the truth about [her] and everyone could see it."[36]

As was stated earlier, the necessary condition for shame to show is a failure. In *Lady Oracle* it was Joan's mother who failed to recognise Joan's affirmative self-evaluation: instead of a plump and pretty girl, she saw her daughter as absurd and misshapen, and she felt ashamed for her. Joan's shame was hence brought by the severely negative judgement (and shame) of the (ideal/thin) (m)other. One look at herself through her mother's eyes made Joan cry "over [her] thwarted wings,"[37] and feel "naked" and "exposed" as a Mothball. Once confronted with the humiliating evaluation of herself, Joan realised the incongruity between her self and the way in which this self might be evaluated by the (ideal) other. This "other," scornful perspective was learnt and taken in: Joan internalised the entire scene – her mother's scornful look, Ms Flegg looking down on her, her degradingly non-butterfly image in the mirror, the Mothball punishment. It was the critical gaze that gave birth to the inner split of Joan's personality into the disapproving "critic" and helpless "performer." The disunion is particularly drastic because the "critic" is omnipresent, always watching and never pleased with the "performer" who is precisely what the critic scorns, hates and desires to criticise. Dissociated from Joan Foster as the subject of her shame, but still attached to her by this rubbery umbilical cord, the fat ballerina grew up into the Fat Lady.

Joan first came across the Fat Lady as a teenager. At that time she already "looked like a beluga whale and never opened her mouth except to put something into it."[38] At school, Joan "played kindly aunt and wisewoman to a number of pancake-madeup, cashmere-sweatered, pointy-breasted girls."[39] She soaked the feminine secrets in like a big sponge, herself beyond gender. That was the sacrifice

[36] Ibidem.
[37] Ibidem, p. 51.
[38] Ibidem, p. 74.
[39] Ibidem, p. 93.

she made: the offering of pink tights, ballet slippers, the fluffy skirt, glittering tiara, and cellophane wings.

The real Fat Lady was the attraction of Canadian National exhibition, which Joan visited with her favourite (fat) Aunt Lou. Two tents that Joan was forbidden to enter – the Dancing Girls and the Freak Show – merged in her memories into one. Apart from women in harem costumes, the fire-eater, sword-swallower, the Rubber Man and the Siamese Twins, the tent had the "fattest woman in the world:" the Fat Lady. Although Joan never actually saw the corporeal Fat Lady, the fleshy circus performer intruded in Joan's fantasies and became the grotesque Dancing Girl, the Butterfly who grew up and did not dance:

> I used to imagine the Fat Lady sitting on a chair, knitting, while lines and lines of thin gray faces filed past her, looking, looking. I saw her in gauze pants and a maroon satin brassiere, like the dancing girls, and red slippers. I thought about what she would feel. One day she would rebel, she would do something; meanwhile she made her living from their curiosity. She was knitting a scarf, for one of her relatives who had known her from a child and didn't find her strange at all.[40]

Fat Joan's shame which resulted in the internalisation of the fat circus attraction, was the shame about eating, which itself was a "substitute for shame-bound interpersonal needs."[41] Longing to be wanted, loved and admired became shame, "and so [Joan ate] more to anaesthetise the longing."[42] Joan's internalised shame about her self made her overgrow the standards of femininity: she became too big to be a woman. This changed when adult Joan transfigured in an attractive silhouette and became a wife, poet and public figure.

Concealment became thin Joan's obsession. She invented herself as a former cheerleader and concocted an "Aunt Deirdre [who] was

[40] Ibidem, p. 90.
[41] Kaufman, *The Psychology of Shame...*, p. 129.
[42] Ibidem.

a bitch"[43] and now, in photographs, replaced "this woman of no discernible age who stood squinting at camera, holding a cone of pink spun sugar, her face puffed and empty as a mongoloid idiot: [Joan's] own shucked-off body."[44] The Fat Lady began to transform, too; no longer was she a ridiculous creature whom one could wish well and sympathise with. The Fat Lady, dangerously, became akin to Joan-in-the-past. Shame kept pervading Joan's mind even when she was thin, as if all this flesh was not really disposed of, but just became transparent and spectral like the Fat Lady; as if Joan's fat became the Fat Lady herself: the remainder and portent of failure. The "correction" Joan imposed on her shameful body, did not free her from shame. Having slimmed down, she weighed the same since the fat only travelled to the other side of the umbilical cord. Like a "mist,"[45] like "a phantom moon, like the image of Dumbo the Flying Elephant,"[46] "the outline of [Joan's] former body [...] surrounded [her]."[47]

The incorporeal, balloon nature of the Fat Lady was unveiled when Joan watched the Olympic doubles figure-skating championships. The Fat Lady suddenly appeared on the ice, "in a pink skating costume, her head ornamented with swan's-down:"[48]

> She smiled at the crowd, nobody smiled back, they didn't believe what they were seeing because she was whirling around the rink with exceptional grace, spinning like a top of her tiny feet, then the thin man lifted her and threw her and she floated up, up, she hung suspended [...] her secret was that although she was so large, she was very light, she was hollow, like a helium balloon, they had to keep her tethered to her bed or she'd drift away, all night she strained at the ropes [...] The U.S. team scooted across the bottom of the screen like a centipede, but no one paid any attention, they were all distracted by the huge pink balloon that

[43] Atwood, *Lady Oracle*..., p. 91.
[44] Ibidem.
[45] Ibidem, p. 214.
[46] Ibidem.
[47] Ibidem.
[48] Ibidem, p. 273.

> bobbed with such poor taste above their heads. [...] The Fat Lady kicked her skates feebly; her thighs and the huge moon of her rump were visible. Really it was an outrage. "They've gone for the harpoon gun," I heard the commentator say. They were going to shoot her down in cold blood, explode her, despite the fact that she had now burst into song [...][49]

This fantasy started with a typical shame-provoking situation mentioned before: the Fat Lady smiled to the audience (Joan among them), and hence communicated her willingness to establish contact, but they did not react because they did not believe (in) her. In order for them to believe, the Fat Lady would have to make some sense to them: she would have to be either fat (heavy), or thin (light), either a human (not flying), or a butterfly (flying), either feminine (thin), or not. In order for the viewers (critics) to respect her, she should have kept her misfortune from sight instead of shamelessly exhibiting her beefy buttocks and thighs. Because the Fat Lady was a whale of fat, she was understood, literally, to be a whale, destined to be killed with a harpoon gun. Excessive, meaningless, and wordless, the Fat Lady smiled, danced and sang, and was only seen and heard, but by no means comprehended, as she drifted beyond the binary oppositions and beyond language. The Fat Lady-on-the-rink was a woman beyond the feminine and a parodied siren whose song could not seduce any of the viewers, but Joan – who herself was a freak of two names[50], two pasts, two loves[51], at once an author of feminist poems and costume gothics, critic and performer, Joan-and-the-Fat-Lady.

Before the Fat Lady's final appearance, Joan took a bath in pink water which was "unpleasantly like warm blood,"[52] sat on the balcony and "grew sodden with light; [her] skin on the inside glowed a dull red,"[53] as if blushing inwards:

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[49] Ibidem, p. 274.

[50] Since she secretly wrote costume gothics, she took a pseudonym of Louisa Delacourt.

[51] Apart from being a wife of Arthur, she had a lover who called himself a Royal Porcupine.

[52] Atwood, *Lady Oracle*..., p. 320.

[53] Ibidem.

> Below me, in the foundations of the house, I could hear the clothes I buried there growing themselves a body. It was almost completed; it was digging itself out, like a huge blind mole, slowly and painfully shambling up the hill to the balcony [...] a creature composed of all the flesh that used to be mine and which must have gone somewhere. It would have no features, it would be smooth as a potato, pale as starch, it would look like a big thigh, it would have the face like a breast minus the nipple. It was the Fat Lady. She rose into the air and descended on me as I lay stretched out in the chair. For a moment she hovered around me like ectoplasm, like a gelatine shell, my ghost, my angel; then she settled and I was absorbed into her. Within my former body, I gasped for air. Disguised, concealed, white fur choking my nose and mouth. Obliterated.[54]

The description of the final materialisation of the Fat Lady prefigures Joan's annihilation: she was obliterated, wiped out, made invisible. And yet, it is no longer possible to say who Joan was, or if Joan existed at all; it also becomes impossible to state with any certainty who (if anyone), was annihilated. Did Joan return to a metaphorical, pre-linguistic womb? Does the fur she choked with denote Joan's reinstatement in the teddy-bear/Mothball concealment and consequent final admission: "I am not a butterfly"? Was it a thin, or a fat Joan who stayed, and does it matter at all if the fat is ephemeral? Was Joan killed by the Fat Lady? Certainly not, since the story goes on into a new direction which supposedly leads to Joan's mental coherence. When Joan invited the Fat Lady back, when she welcomed her ("my ghost, my angel"), the painful split, in which all other splits originated, disappeared. The Fat Lady was recognised – not ridiculed (this time devoid of cabaret equipment) – as Joan's flesh. At the same time, in the act of peaceful laying down arms, Joan's awareness of her body ceased to be distressing, because the body was forgiven. The distance, be it as short as the umbilical cord, which was necessary for Joan to judge and scorn, vanished. So did shame.

[54] Ibidem, pp. 320–321.